

VIRUS SLOWS CHINA'S MAJOR PROJECTS IN ASIA

Outbreak cuts off labour supplies, equipment imports needed to keep them running

From an artificial island in Sri Lanka to a bridge in Bangladesh and hydropower projects in Nepal and Indonesia, China's trillion-dollar Belt and Road plan is stuttering under the effects of the deadly coronavirus.

The outbreak that emerged in China in late December and spread to dozens of countries has cut off the Chinese labour supplies and equipment imports needed to keep major infrastructure projects running.

More than 133 countries have imposed entry restrictions on Chinese citizens or people who have visited China to prevent the spread of the disease, data from China's National Immigration Agency showed.

China itself has imposed quarantines and travel curbs across the country to contain an epidemic that has killed more than 2,700 and infected around 79,000.

Sri Lanka requires 14-day quarantine for people arriving from China, and insists projects ensure Chinese staff are restricted to construction sites and their dorms.

At Colombo's Port City -- an artificial island the size of central London that is to house one of South Asia's biggest financial centres -- work was progressing at a snail's pace as nearly a third of the Chinese workers who left for the Lunar New Year holidays have not returned.

The March opening of South Asia's tallest free-standing communications tower -- built with Chinese state funding in the heart of Colombo -- has also been delayed by two months.

Bangladesh has stopped issuing visas to Chinese visitors including Chinese workers.

Some 3,000 Chinese workers are employed at the China-funded \$2.5 billion 1,320-megawatt Bangladesh China Power Company at the southern port of Payra.

Nearly two-thirds of them had returned to China during the Lunar New Year in January, said project manager Abdul Moula.

"Our plan is to start full scale operation by next month. But if at least 300 Chinese workers don't come back by this month ... power production could be delayed," he said.

At the \$3.5 billion Padma Multipurpose Bridge, being built by state-owned China Major Railway Bridge Company, nearly one-third of the 980 Chinese workers have yet to return, said project manager Dewan Abdul Kader.

On Indonesia's Sumatra island, work at the China-backed Batang Toru hydropower plant has ground to a halt due to a lack of Chinese workers, after Indonesia halted all flights to and from mainland China.

Construction of the \$6 billion Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project will also be delayed, according to Indonesia's investment affairs minister Luhut Pandjaitan.

More than 133 countries imposed entry restrictions on Chinese citizens to prevent the spread of the disease



(Clockwise from left) South Korean President Moon Jae-in (R) has his body temperature checked as he arrives at the National Assembly in Seoul yesterday. Cooks wearing hazardous material suits prepare lunch for workers at a garment factory, the Zhejiang Ugly Duck Industry in Wenzhou, China. A soldier checks the body temperature of a visitor to the 68 Nigerian Army Reference Hospital at Yaba in Lagos.



PHOTO: AFP

Malaysian turmoil deepens

Palace rejects Mahathir's plan for vote to choose new PM

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's king yesterday struck down a power play by 94-year-old Mahathir Mohamad aimed at seizing momentum in a political crisis, capping a week of turmoil that has left the country effectively leaderless.

He rejected Mahathir's plan to convene parliament to vote on the country's next prime minister, after it was widely criticised as against the constitution.

Old foes Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim are locked in a power struggle sparked by the elderly leader's resignation and their ruling coalition's collapse, following a failed bid to push out leader-in-waiting Anwar.

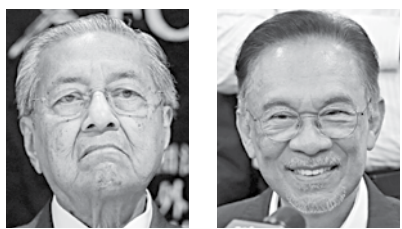
The men had reconciled and led their coalition to victory in 2018 against a corrupt government, but this week's drama has revived a rivalry that has long shaped the Southeast Asian nation's politics.

Mahathir, currently interim leader, earlier announced the parliament session would take place Monday and the monarch, who appoints the premier, agreed with the decision.

But after a meeting of the country's

Islamic sultans, the king, Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah, said the sitting would not take place, according to a palace statement.

The monarch has met all the country's MPs this week to work out who they back for premier, but no candidate has emerged with enough support. A candidate must have support of at least 112 MPs.



"The king will continue to strive to find a solution in accordance with the constitution, in the interests of the people and country," said the statement from royal official Ahmad Fadzil Shamsuddin.

Palace officials will now hold talks with the leaders of different parties and ask them to put forward candidates, extending the turmoil and

heightening the chances of a snap poll.

The announcement dealt a major blow to the strategy of Mahathir, who has long had a difficult relationship with the country's royals as he sought to curb their powers during a first stint as premier from 1981 to 2003.

The party of Mahathir -- at 94 the world's oldest leader -- said it was nominating Muhyiddin Yassin. It signalled Mahathir was giving up on returning as premier himself but wanted an ally in the role.

The former ruling coalition meanwhile said it was nominating Anwar, 72.

The men's stormy relationship dates back to the 1990s when Mahathir sacked Anwar as his deputy, and he was jailed on dubious sodomy charges.

The political uncertainty comes at a testing time for Malaysia's economy, which has been flagging as it deals with fallout from the coronavirus epidemic. The main stock index plunged 12% this week, its sharpest weekly fall since 2011, as global indices also dived.

Women's inequality a global 'shame'

REUTERS, New York

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called women's inequality "stupid" and a cause for global shame on Thursday, as he pledged to press governments to end discriminatory laws in the face of a "strong and relentless pushback" against women's rights.

While Guterres did not name and shame, US President Donald Trump's administration has led a push at the UN against the promotion of sexual and reproductive health services for women because the administration sees that as code for abortion.

Speaking ahead of the annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York next month, Guterres warned that the state of women's rights was dire and said he would seek to end "default male thinking" across the United Nations.

"Just as slavery and colonialism were a stain on previous centuries, women's inequality should shame us all in the 21st. Because it is not only unacceptable; it is stupid," Guterres said in a speech to The New School in New York.

He said legal protections against rape and domestic violence were being diluted or rolled back and that in 34 countries rape within marriage was still legal.

"There is a strong and relentless pushback against women's rights," Guterres said. "Women's sexual and reproductive rights are under threat from different sides."



Hindu woman gets married in Muslim neighbourhood

REUTERS, New Delhi

As deadly clashes between Hindu and Muslim groups rocked parts of the Indian capital Delhi this week, the family of a young Hindu woman living in a Muslim-majority area was forced to cancel her wedding.

Dressed in her wedding finery, her hands laced maroon with henna and her skin cleansed with turmeric, 23-year-old Savitri Prasad said she was weeping in her home as violent mobs battled outside on Tuesday, which was to have been her wedding day.

But Savitri's father then organised the wedding for the following day, saying his Muslim neighbours were family and he was comforted by their presence.

"My Muslim brothers are protecting me today," Savitri told a Reuters team that visited the house on the day of the ceremony, breaking down again as her family and neighbours comforted her.

The rituals took place at Savitri's home, a small brick building in a narrow alley in

the Chand Bagh district. Steps away, the main street looked like a war zone, with cars and shops vandalised, a Muslim shrine torched and the area littered with rocks used in pitched battles between mobs on both sides.

"We went to the terrace and just saw smoke and more smoke," Bhoday Prasad, Savitri's father, said of the scene on Monday and Tuesday. "It is terrifying. We just want peace."

Bhoday Prasad said he has lived in the area for years alongside Muslims without any trouble.

Violence ebbed on Wednesday, but markets remained shut and residents stayed indoors, fearful of further clashes. Savitri's father said he decided to organise a scaled-down ceremony.

Muslim neighbours gathered to offer blessings as the groom arrived and the wedding rituals took place, with a Hindu priest reciting holy verses and the groom and bride taking the rounds of a small pyre set up inside the house.



A dinghy with 15 Afghan refugees approaches the shore of the Greek island of Lesbos yesterday. Turkey will no longer close its border gates to refugees who want to go to Europe, a senior official said.

PHOTO: AFP

Delhi govt gives nod to prosecute Kanhaiya

The Delhi government has given its approval to police to prosecute former Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU) president Kanhaiya Kumar and others in a sedition case for allegedly raising anti-India slogans during an event inside the university campus in February 2016. The approval was awaited for a long time. On January 14 last year, the police had filed a chargesheet in the court against Kumar and others, including former JNU students Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya, stating that they were leading a procession and supported the seditious slogans raised on the campus during an event on February 9, 2016. The police had at the same time filed a request for prosecution sanction from the government.

Thai prime minister survives vote of no confidence

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and five cabinet ministers comfortably survived a vote of no confidence in parliament yesterday, a week after a court ban on 11 opposition lawmakers increased the ruling coalition's parliamentary majority. The Constitutional Court dissolved the opposition Future Forward Party, the third-largest in parliament, and banned 11 of its lawmakers from politics for a decade on the grounds the party breached the law by taking loans from its leader. The court's decision has sparked protests by university students around the country. Prayuth had been expected to survive the censure motion even before the reduction in opposition numbers in parliament. But he faced some of the fiercest public criticism since he transitioned last year from military ruler to head of an elected government.



'The world is on fire,' Greta Thunberg tells UK rally

Greta Thunberg denounced politicians and the media yesterday for ignoring a looming climate cataclysm, saying that they were failing her generation with their inaction in the face of a world on fire. Several thousand people attended a rally in the southwestern English city of Bristol to see Thunberg, the teenage activist who has reprimanded governments across the world over climate change. "I will not be silenced while the world is on fire - will you?" said Thunberg. "This emergency is being completely ignored by the politicians, the media and those in power. Basically nothing is being done ... despite all the beautiful words." SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS, TNN

'The cave' in Idlib

Fleeing the bombs, Syrians set up camp underground

AFP, Taltuna

In a field dotted with olive trees in embattled northwestern Syria, Shamseddeen Darra steps down into the gloomy underground shelter he and his family now call home.

After fleeing a deadly offensive by government forces on their home region of Idlib, they found nowhere else to go.

Beyond rolling hills in the village of Taltuna, Darra, his three brothers, their wives and more than a dozen children share a small room in the belly of the earth.

"We're living here for lack of a better option," says 35-year-old Darra, who calls their makeshift shelter "the cave".

"We didn't have any tents. We stayed in the town mosque for two days. We looked for a place to stay but found nothing," he explained.

After they found the abandoned shelter, dug out by villagers earlier in the civil war to hide from air strikes, they cleaned it out and moved in.

Backed by Russia, government forces have been chipping away at Syria's last major rebel bastion since December.

The region is run by jihadists and allied rebel groups, and is home to around three million civilians.



The violence has forced 900,000 of them to flee their homes or shelters, more than half of them children.

Inside their new underground home, Darra's children huddle on a carpet around a tray covered in small bowls of hummus and dried oregano in olive oil.

Sunshine seeps in only from the staircase, the only source of light to cast away the dank darkness. In a corner, the family has piled its scant belongings under a red and navy blue blanket.

"We're suffering from the humidity. The kids are sick," he said, as nearby one of them started crying.

"And there are bugs," added Darra, wearing a thick black hooded sweatshirt.

Not far off, 40-year-old Abu Mohammed had also set up

camp in an underground bunker. He and around 40 people now share the space, where they have thrown a plastic rug on the ground and piled plastic jars of pickled olives and other food along the uneven wall.

When we first arrived, "the cave was dirty. There was animal excrement," said Abu Mohammed, wearing a black leather jacket and sporting a greying beard.

Chinese destroyer fires laser at US aircraft: US Navy

CNN ONLINE

The US Navy said Thursday that a Chinese military warship fired a military grade laser at US Navy P-8 surveillance aircraft last week while it was flying over the Pacific Ocean, an action that the US Navy called "unsafe and unprofessional."

The People's Republic of China "navy destroyer's actions were unsafe and unprofessional," US Pacific Fleet said in a statement Thursday.

"Weapons-grade lasers could potentially cause serious harm to aircrew and mariners, as well as ship and aircraft systems," the statement added.

Military-grade laser beams, occasionally known as "dazzlers," omit a powerful beam of light that can travel great distances and be used to illuminate aircraft cockpits, temporarily blinding pilots.

Defense officials told CNN that a formal diplomatic protests known as a demarche is expected to be issued.

The incident comes amid ongoing tensions between the US and Chinese militaries.

The Pentagon has repeatedly said that China represents an increasingly serious threat to regional security, saying that major Chinese investments in its military are aimed at achieving regional dominance.

"Over time, we have watched them seize and militarize islands in the South China Sea, and rapidly modernize their armed forces, while seeking to use emerging technologies to alter the landscape of power and reshape the world in their favor ... and often at the expense of others," US Defense Secretary Mark Esper said earlier

this month. The US has similarly issued such diplomatic protests in the past due to what the US said was Chinese military forces using lasers against US aircraft.

One such incident took place in the East African nation of Djibouti where both the US and China maintain military bases.

